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ABSTRACT

The development of a child's social awareness is reflected in, and in part accomplished through, requests. Requests for action and information--such as the assistance of another, typically older person--require an important set of linguistic and social skills. Re-requests become necessary when the initial request is ignored or not adequately fulfilled. This re-request situation is of special interest because of the increased vulnerability of "face," and the need to take the other person's response into consideration. A study investigated how children gain the social awareness skills necessary to make flexible re-requests. Twenty-one children--ranging in age from 20 to 50 months, from white, predominantly middle-class families--were interviewed individually in familiar surroundings by a junior or senior student enrolled in a language and speech development course. The interviews were audiotaped and transcripts made of the first 50 utterances occurring after the initial introductions and accompanying adult utterances. These transcripts were then examined for utterances of requests and re-requests. Results suggest that the children were in the process of developing re-request strategies. (A transcript illustrating how a repertoire of indirect request strategies may be developed is included.) (Author/DF)

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Re-request Strategies as Indicators of How Children Gain Social Knowledge

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Abstract

The development of a child's social awareness is reflected in, and in part accomplished through, requests. Requests for action and information--the assistance of another, typically older person--require an important set of linguistic and social skills, as they demand satisfaction through, or in conflict with, the needs and desires of another. Re-requests become necessary when the initial request is ignored, or not adequately fulfilled. The re-request situation is of special interest because of the increased vulnerability of "face", and need to take the other person's response into consideration. The present paper investigates how children gain the social awareness skills necessary to make flexible indirect re-requests. An example of how a repertoire of indirect request strategies may be developed is presented.

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Re-request Strategies as Indicators of How Children Gain Social Knowledge

Introduction:

Language plays a big role in the social development of children. It provides a social structuring of thought within a sociocultural experience (Vygotsky, 1978). With its acquisition new social relations occur which enrich and transform the thought of the child (Perret-Clermont, 1980). The child learns more than articulation, vocabulary, linguistic syntax, and referential meaning. She or he also learns the functional meaning of communicative utterances (Halliday, 1973). To achieve the diversity and simultaneity of function to which adults put language the child must understand the functions of language to express and create the personal and social relations of a situation (Halliday, 1973). This understanding of communicative utterances as social acts is acquired at an early age (Garvey, 1975; Olson & Hildyard, 1981). In fact children do not initially learn the literal meaning of utterances. They first learn the social ones (Olson & Hildyard, 1981).

The social way in which language is used by the child can provide an important index to the progress of this social development. Request strategies provide particularly good markers.

Request Strategies:

Becker (1982), and Olson & Hildyard (1981) report that even young children abstract and respond to the social meaning of indirect requests rather than the expressed literal meaning. Following Becker (1982), we are using the term request here to refer to an utterance expressing a speaker's desire to get the listener to do something such as provide information, give permission, or perform an action. What we are refering to as a request others have called a directive, mand, behabitive, imperative, or impositive (Becker, 1982).

Requests are frequently described in terms of their degree of directness or concealment of purpose (Becker, 1982; Ervin-Tripp, 1977). Garvey (1975) provides a typical classification of requests as being either direct, or of one of two types of indirect, or inferred, requests. For present purposes the distinction between direct and indirect requests provides an adequate classification scheme. Direct requests express the content (A will do X), either as an imperative utterance ("Open the door"), or with a performative marker ("I request that you open the door"). Indirect requests embed the content of the utterance so that it is more indirectly expressed ("See if you can open the door") (Garvey, 1975).

Request strategies are good markers of the developing competence in pragmatic language use for several reasons. (1) Requests are frequently used in early language development. (2) They are important for initiating and sustaining social interaction. (3) They involve a multitude of linguistic and social skills (Becker, 1982 pg. 3).
(4) "Requests implicate an interesting and important set of social meanings- that is, the desire or needs of one person are to be satisfied through or in conflict with the desires and needs of another person" (Garvey, 1975 pg. 45). Recent work, particularly by Becker (1982), Garvey (1975), and Olson & Hildyard (1981), provide a framework for the analysis of request strategies.

The Functional Use of Requests:

Children have been shown to understand the functional meaning of indirect requests at a very young age (Olson & Hildyard, 1981). Becker (1982) suggests that children's choices of request strategies, direct or indirect, reflect the relative status, as defined in terms of control of resources, of the speaker and listener. While Olson & Hildyard (1981) concur with this analysis, they suggest that request strategies may also be used by the child in attempts to establish a dominant status in a relationship. In addition, degrees of politeness, or "niceness" in the form of requests can be identified, and are considered important, by children (Becker, 1982).

Of present interest is not the exact dimensions along which children make these distinctions among request strategies, but the fact that they can make the distinctions. Whether it is due to considerations of politeness, of status, or both, to choose a strategy the child must first have a repertoire of strategies to choose from, and a social awareness upon which to make that choice.

Older children should demonstrate greater flexibility in their choice of requests. They have a larger repertoire of requests so they can rephrase or modify the original request. Younger children do not have this repertoire and often repeat the same request with little or no modification.

The Importance of Re-requests:

The stability of the social awareness is tested by the need to restate a request, or to re-request. Different types of social situations make re-requests necessary. If the initial request is ignored then the same information or assistance must be asked for again. Even if the initial request is responded to, additional requests for information or assistance may be necessary. Each of these types of re-requesting places a strain upon the social situation and the need to maintain "face".

Brown and Levinson (1978) derived the notion of "face" from Goffman (1971) as something "that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interactions" (pg. 66). There is a mutual vulnerability of face as "everyone's face depends on everyone else's being maintained... It is in general in every participant's best interest to maintain each other's face" (Brown and Levinson, 1978, pg. 66).

For the child who is still learning to differentiate the use of a variety of request strategies, the re-request situation, with its additional strain on "face" maintenance, is a particularly fragile one. A request has been put forth. Now, to accomplish the goal, they must re-request. Whether the first request was attended to or ignored, a response has been made. "Face" is maintained, at least in part, by taking this response into account. The extent to which the child's re-request takes the response into consideration reflects the child's degree of social awareness. Older children should not only have this larger repertoire of requests, but should be able to state the requests more indirectly while taking the other person's response into consideration.

Methods

The present paper examines the re-request strategies undertaken by children, ages 20 to 55 months. During this age

period children are developing a social awareness reflected in the interactions in which requests and re-requests are employed. The re-request strategies are important to the present investigation because of the "face" involved in these situations. To emphasize the vulnerability of this "face" further, situations were used in which the child was making requests of a non-intimate adult, that is someone other than a mother, father, immediate family member, or primary caregiver.

Twenty-one children from white, predominantly middle-class, families provided the data. There were 16 girls and 5 boys. Each child was interviewed individually in familiar surroundings, usually either the child's home or day care center. A junior or senior student enrolled in a language and speech development course interviewed the child and audiotaped the interaction as part of a regular class assignment. Transcripts were made of the first fifty child utterances that occurred after the initial introductions and the accompanying adult utterances. The transcripts were spot verified against the original tape. These transcripts were then examined for utterances of requests and re-requests.

All of the children generated utterances containing direct requests. These were usually requests for information. Most of the children responded to the intent of indirect requests made by the adult interviewer and many of them formulated indirect requests themselves. Fifteen of the twenty-one transcripts contained instances of re-requests made by the child. The re-request strategy employed in each of these situations was examined.

Results

Two types of re-request strategies emerged as distinct in terms of the characteristics of directness, variety of vocabulary, and maintenance of "face". The first type of re-request strategy was less flexible. This type of request was usually a direct request re-stated, almost verbatim, in a demanding verbal style, and with more emphasis. Jeremy (42 months) provides an example.

Jeremy: Is a bucket loader?
Nancy (student): Nope, It's not a bucket loader.
Jeremy: You gotta draw a bucket loader too.
Nancy (student): I don't know what a bucket loader looks like.
Jeremy: Allen has a bucket loader
Nancy (student): Allen has a bucket loader? I don't have time to go up and look at Allen's bucket loader.
Jeremy: You draw one.
Nancy (student): (changes subject to Allen etc. for a minute)
Jeremy: Draw a bucket loader.
Nancy (student): Draw a bucket loader? You're making this real difficult for me aren't you? (starts to draw with orange pencil)
Jeremy: No! Green I said!
Nancy (student): I thought you said orange! A bucket loader.
Jeremy: Draw it! Hurry up!

Jeremy's request strategy consists primarily of re-stating the original direct request in an abreviated form: "You gotta draw a bucket loader too", "Draw a bucket loader.", "Draw it!". Each time he becomes more emphatic and excited. Each request is a restatement of his original demand without taking into account Nancy's responses

or the maintainence of "face". In contrast to this style a more flexible strategy usually re-stated the request indirectly, rephrasing and modifying the original request while taking into account the responses of the other person. Laura (5½ months) provides an example of this type of re-request strategy.

Laura: Why are we painting instead of coloring?
Jane (student): We could do either one. I thought it might be fun, because we don't paint very much.
Laura: No, we don't that's right.
Jane (student): Thought it would be nice, something different to do.
Laura: We don't color very much either.
Jane (student): Not together.
Laura: No.
Jane (student): No.
Laura: I don't, I don't, I'm not very much, now I'm bigger I don't really color very often.

Laura's request strategy is more flexible and indirect. She begins with a request for information: "Why are we painting instead of coloring?". She then makes a series of indirect re-requests which are re-worded each time to take her partner's response into account. Her re-requests involve greater perspective taking and function to maintain "face". Her strategy is a more difficult one because she takes Jane's reason for painting instead of coloring into account.

Nancy tells Jeremy that she doesn't know what a bucket loader looks like and doesn't have time to go look at Allen's. Jeremy simply replies: "You draw one." Jane suggests that they are painting instead of coloring because they don't paint much. Laura first affirms the truth of that statement. Then she suggests that they don't color much either. When Jane keys on the "We" and states "not together", Laura still trys to take Jane's reasoning into account. She takes an extra conversational turn and then, after several false starts, states that she doesn't often color by herself either. Laura's conversational re-requests are more flexible in the re-statement of her request, adapting to her partner's responses, and maintaining "face".

Re-requests, Age, and Mean Length of Utterance:

Of the fifteen children making re-requests, nine of them made less flexible, more direct types of re-requests, similar to the ones Jeremy used. The other six children made more flexible, indirect requests similar to the ones that Laura made. These two groups of children differed from each other in two important ways. Analyses of variance showed that they differed significantly in age, (means: inflexible=37.9, flexible=47.8 months; $F=6.40$, $df=1,13$ $p<.02$), and in mean length of utterance (means: inflexible=3.26, flexible=5.19; $F=11.94$, $df=1,13$ $p<.005$). Age and mean length of utterance were also significantly correlated ($r=.60$, $p.=.0035$). The children who used the more flexible re-request strategies were, as expected, older and, as indicated by their mean length of utterance, more linguistically developed.

These two groups were compared for initial request strategies. Six of the nine children in the younger group used direct initial requests followed by direct re-requests. Three of the children in this younger group began with indirect requests and switched to the direct ones upon re-requesting. All six of the children in the

older group began and followed with indirect requests. The children in the younger group were both less flexible in their re-requesting, and less consistently flexible in their re-requesting.

Discussion

These results suggest that the children in this study, ranging in age from 20 to 55 months, are in the process of developing flexible re-request strategies. Requests made by the younger children tend to be more direct and less flexible. Those made by the older children are not only more flexible, but retain that flexibility upon re-requesting. It has been suggested that the older children can be more flexible because they have a larger repertoire of requests from which to choose when rephrasing and modifying the original request. Younger children do not have this repertoire, so restate the same request. But the differences between the two types of requests relies on more than the size of the available repertoire from which to choose. The requests of the older children demonstrate a greater ability to take the other person's response into account and more concern for maintaining "face". The child has developed not just more strategies, but more flexible strategies. Laura's re-requests, for instance, are not just more indirect than Jeremy's, and not just more varied in their wording. She does more than use an increased vocabulary. She demonstrates a greater awareness of social interaction, and concern for its maintenance.

Developing Re-request Strategies:

The current data may do more than provide an indication of the level of social awareness each child has achieved. They may also contain examples of the development in action. What children can do with the help of an adult is in some ways a better indication of their mental development than what they can achieve by themselves (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 85). As Wertsch suggests (1979), in an adult-child interaction the adult is participating in a coherent language-game. The child interprets the adult's speech as a series of utterances and must fit them together into an integrated activity. In the current data, to develop more flexible re-request strategies, the child must enlarge his or her repertoire of possible requests from which to choose. Finding flexible ways of speaking about an activity is the language game. The individual requests are the utterances which must fit. The child can develop new ways of speaking about the activity through the interaction of requests and responses. Vygotsky argues that the child does this by listening to how the adult speaks about the activity. The child can then "test" these new ways for herself or himself. There are several occurrences in the transcripts in which this type of testing process appears to be occurring. A good example is one in which Darren (41 months), interacts with Debbie (the student) at putting a puzzle together.

Debbie: It'll be funner to put the puzzle back together. So we don't know exactly where the pieces go. Ok lets try to put it together.
Darren: Where this go?
Debbie: What's it look like?
Darren: This.
Debbie: That's where it goes. Push. There.

Darren: Where this go? Where this go?
Debbie: Does it go there?
Darren: This is another game.
Debbie: That's his arm.
Darren: How do we get this in?
Debbie: How do you get that in?
Darren: Yeah.
Debbie: Well try right there. There that wasn't hard was it?
Darren: Where this go?
Debbie: What's it look like to you?
Darren: I can't see. I can't see. I can't see where it goes.
Debbie: Right about in there somewhere. Just move it around a little bit. Right, you know where that goes.
Darren: Where this go?
Debbie: Right. Push down.
Darren: Where this go? It is pushed.
Debbie: Yup.
Darren: Where this go? Where this go?
Debbie: I don't know. Why don't you try a little bigger piece? Maybe then we can fit this one in later. What's that look like to you?
Darren: Nothing.
Debbie: Nothing?
Darren: No. It fits here.
Debbie: Yeah. Do you know what it is?
Darren: It. Maybe it fits here.
Debbie: Yes. Yeah. It fits.
Darren: It belongs there.
Debbie: Yeah. It belongs there. Yup.
Darren: What is this?
Debbie: I don't know.
Darren: You put this on.
Debbie: Try right there. Right. How about right around here? Do you think?
Darren: Nope.
Debbie: Nope.
Darren: This go?
Debbie: I don't know.
Darren: Maybe it fits there.
Debbie: Maybe. Good job!
Darren: Where this go? Where do you think?
Debbie: Where do you think it goes? Yeah.
Darren: Maybe it fits here.
Debbie: Maybe it does.
Darren: Maybe it doesn't. Where this go?
Debbie: I think you know where that goes. Why don't you try to put it in.
Darren: Let's think.
Debbie: Let's think. Well?
Darren: I think this right. There.
Debbie: Yeah. I think that goes there too.
Darren: Help me push it in.
Debbie: Push it in.
Darren: Where this go? Right?
Debbie: Hmm, Hmm.
Darren: Maybe it fits there. Maybe it.
Debbie: Maybe it does. I think it does fit there.
Darren: Maybe. Let's think. Let's think.

Debbie: Let's think. Oh. Let's think. Push. Push harder. Gee, that wasn't hard for you at all to figure out was it?

Darren does two things of interest in this conversation. One is that his requests about where the pieces fit into the puzzle become more flexible in style and more indirect in form as the conversation progresses. The other is that he achieves this flexibility by taking his partner's responses into account. But he does more than take them into account. He reuses them in a way that he does not reuse his own statements. Darren initiates the statements: "How do we get this in?", "It belongs there.", and "This is another game". Debbie is the first to suggest that pieces can go somewhere, be pushed down, fit, and thought about. Darren "plays" with these statements introduced by Debbie repeating and combining them in ways that he doesn't reuse his own. So, at the end of the interaction, instead of constantly repeating his original question: "Where this go?", he is saying: "Let's think.", "I think this right.", "Help me push it in.", "Where this go?", "Maybe it fits there.", "Let's think.", "Let's think". Darren's communication is not just flowing out of the situation. He incorporates the responses of his listener into his speaking. Doing this allows him to develop new requests.

Darren's behavior in this conversational segment is consistent with Wertsch and Vygotsky's notions of how a child internalizes mental functions through conversational interactions with an adult. Darren listens to the adult's way of speaking about putting pieces into the puzzle and fits these utterances to his own speech.

Summary and Conclusions:

Children between the ages of 22 and 55 months are developing flexible, indirect request strategies which maintain "face" by taking the other person's responses into account. Children apparently work actively at this process. As suggested by Vygotsky (1978) and Wertsch (1979) the speaking--the communicative action and interaction--itself contributes to the development.

It has been the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that children learn more than the vocabulary and referential meaning of communicative utterances. This has been done with an analysis of how children use re-request strategies. This analysis indicates that children develop strategies which are not only more indirect in form and more diverse in vocbulary but which also function to maintain "face" by taking the speaking partner's response into account.

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